



A young Aruban softball star looks to further her career and education in the U.S.

Twenty-year old Zaira Pourier departed Aruba this past week to begin further her education at Miami Dade College in Florida, one of fifteen students assisted financially by the Aruba Scholarship Foundation. When awarding this year's scholarships, Zaira merited special mention from foundation president Clyde Harms, for her many years of exemplary athletic devotion and achievement on behalf of her island to the sport of softball. She spent then years playing softball in Aruba, first as an outfielder, and eventually as catcher. Zaira participated as a member of Aruba's All-Star team, competing in regional championships in Puerto Rico six times, and in Mexico, where they were only one pop-fly away from making it to the World Series of Softball.

Zaira plans to study Architecture while at Miami Dade, but her first love is softball, and she has taken steps to be part of the school's team. Unfortunately, they only allow four foreign students on the team, but they are allowing her to train along with the other players, monitoring her progress. She hopes that eventually a spot will open for her on the school team. "I consider it a great honor that I will even have this opportunity to train in such an environment that will be so positive and professional towards my development and improvement as a player," she expressed. "Part of the problem, particularly for girls in Aruba, is that they don't get enough opportunity to train with professional coaches, or train as much as they should, as there is little to no governmental support for the program." Carmelita Haynes of Aruba, a softball enthusiast in her youth, was a strong supporter of the Girls Softball Federation, and is now the Secretary General. Her intervention was instrumental in making a dream come true for Zaira and other young players in 2005.

At the age of seventeen, Zaira decided that the Aruban team needed something more to achieve their goal of participating in the World Series of Softball. She contacted a number of softball professionals online, and after initially being ignored or rejected, she got an immediate and warm response from Olympic gold medalist Michele Smith, who now plays professionally for Toyota in Japan.

Michele took an instant interest in the young woman and her hopes to see her team improve through professional coaching, and was willing to come to Aruba to conduct a clinic. At this point, Carmelita took over, "and like a miracle, the next thing I know, she was able to arrange for Michele to come here and run a clinic for three days. Many people cooperated with accommodations, meals and airline tickets, and we had the thrilling honor to work with Michele, who really helped the team progress." A photo history of that clinic is online at Michele's website:

<http://michelesmithgoldcamps.smugmug.com/gallery/661719#28501566>

The experience for Zaira was an epiphany, as it gave her confidence in herself, and motivation in all aspects of her life. Aside from meeting someone that for her is a "hero;" something she considers one of the great moments of her life, it also taught her self-determination. "Until Michele was actually here, I could not believe it, that I actually made that happen, and could get someone so important to me, from so far away, to come to Aruba and help my team. I thought I was dreaming that it would actually happen." Reports Zaira, "I was in shock when she arrived at the airport. She was so kind and approachable, and for me, her clinics were something "holy," it helped so many children." Michele did many wonderful things for the Aruban team, aside from coaching; amongst them donating pitching machines to the team to help improve their batting average. "Michele's coming to Aruba opened the eyes of the children here that there is a somewhere they can go playing softball, that there is a world out there of which they can become a part."

"For me," expressed Zaira, "this taught me that I can accomplish whatever I wish. I learned that if I put the power behind it, I can achieve my goals. The road of life can be so hard and full of obstacles, but if I am determined, I will overcome them. That I, some seventeen-year-old from a small island could accomplish getting a big star like Michele to Aruba; that opened many doors for me, it taught me that I can achieve anything if I am willing to do the hard work and to keep my direction. I hope after my education to come back to Aruba and help my island as an architect, or in softball. I hope to be an example for other young Aruban women, that if they put their mind to it, they can also achieve their goals."

Zaira admits that if a career in softball is offered to her, she will pursue it, as it is her first love, and it is something to do while young, but she will complete her education and get her degree. Getting an education in the United States is also a dream come true, but to achieve a career in softball is always something she will keep in her heart. Softball will always be a part of her life, and plans when she eventually returns to Aruba to pursue a career as an architect, she will still be involved in coaching and

hopefully inspiring other young players. Aruba's softball league is a junior league; only accepting players to the age of eighteen, but Zaira will never give up her first love, in that she is determined.